

INTRODUCTION

A Perennial Question

Port-au-Prince, Haiti, August 1995



Women merchants wait in line at a savings and loan office near Thiotte, Haiti. Such small business women, *ti machann*, are the mainstay of Haiti's informal economy. Image © Gideon Mendel/CORBIS.

The lunchroom of the U.S. embassy is chilled by constant air conditioning. Fluorescent light glares off the hard planes of plastic tables and the linoleum floor. Styrofoam cups of Coca-Cola and instant coffee are on offer to visitors. The spare environment conveys efficiency and reassures the visitor that the familiar sights, smells, and tastes of a prefabricated American culture can prevail even here, inside this artificial bubble, away from the noise of the teeming streets, the hot crush of laboring bodies, and the swirling aromas of charcoal, sweat, diesel exhaust, and rotting garbage. (A decade later, journalist Christian Parenti will describe a similar atmospheric cocoon inside the Green Zone in U.S.-occupied Iraq.¹)

I visit Haiti in the company of a human-rights lawyer and a Haitian-American translator. Our task: to prepare a report on the aftermath of the notorious 1991 coup d'état that removed from power a democratically elected and wildly popular president, former priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The coup regime that followed presided over three years of terror, during which some five thousand men, women, and children were killed (to name only the conservative estimates of human rights reports) before U.S. Marines landed in a much-celebrated "intervention" in October 1994. Our team's report will focus on the evidence for an orchestrated campaign of sexual assault and torture, carried out by police and paramilitary forces, especially in the poorer neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince. The report we write will be one of the first to focus upon state-sponsored sexual violence against women as a human rights crime.²

Only yesterday, we made our way on foot down the dusty, debris-strewn alleys of Pétionville to meet with a group of forty Haitian women, including frightened teenage girls and wizened old *ti machann*, the street vendors who scratch together a living peddling charcoal stubs, fruit, or chunks of sugarcane in the choking dust and exhaust of the streets. The wide difference in their ages notwithstanding, these women had all been brutally raped and beaten by organized squads of police and paramilitary thugs, members of the notorious Front for the Advancement of the Haitian People (in French, FRAPH), who had swept through their neighborhoods in waves of terror by night. Some of these women had been forced to watch their children beaten or tortured in front of

them; others had watched their husbands or lovers killed or abducted, never to be seen again.

In the months after those attacks, all of these women had come under the cautious, solicitous care of a team of Haitian women lawyers and therapists. After more than a year together, they had decided as a group to go before a much-anticipated "truth commission" to tell their stories.

These courageous women shared a modest lunch of soup and chicken with us, then sang a robust chorus about freedom and invited us to join in an exuberant circle dance. At last, choking back tears and anger, a few of them told us their stories. Several said they still recognized their attackers on the street from time to time, wearing the new uniform of the reorganized Haitian National Police. Although the United Nations was taking extraordinary measures to protect their identities, we asked the women if they feared reprisals even now from the men who had attacked them. "I do not care what they do to me," one woman in her sixties immediately replied, straightening her six-foot frame. "They killed my husband; they can try to kill me. *Men m'ap gen jistis!*—But I will have justice!"

Today, with her cry still ringing in our ears, we have come to the U.S. embassy with something less than optimism. Although the Clinton administration has claimed credit for ending the coup regime by sending Marines ashore in October 1994, we are only too aware how carefully the intervention was structured to protect the coup leaders from prosecution, to obscure any record of U.S. involvement in the violence of the three-year coup regime, and to circumscribe the executive powers of the newly restored president, Aristide.³

With such ominous precedents before us, we want to know what role the U.S. government intends to take in bringing other perpetrators, the "small fry," to justice—for accountability was, after all, what Americans were told was the goal of the 1994 U.S. invasion. We have already heard Haitian human rights leaders voice their grave suspicion that the U.S. government's default on a promise of one million dollars for the long-delayed "truth commission" indicates that the United States will undermine any genuine effort to bring the criminals to account.

The State Department attaché for human rights extends a friendly hand and offers us Cokes. A freshly scrubbed young man with an Ivy League education, looking every bit the calm and efficient young professional though (as he tells us) he is only a few weeks into his new job, he can afford to be cheerful. "U.S. policy in Haiti is the last great experiment in Wilsonian democracy," he buoyantly explains. "What the United States hopes for is another success story like El Salvador."

Our faces betray that his comment has taken us aback. I wonder whether, by naming Wilson, this earnest young man really wants to evoke the horrors perpetrated by Woodrow Wilson's Marines in the wake of the first U.S. invasion of Haiti, what a subsequent internal Marine inquiry described as the "indiscriminate killing" of perhaps 15,000 "natives," and what a Marine officer later called "hunting down" suspected rebels (meaning any who resisted or fled) "like pigs."⁴ Or does

the historical record simply not intrude on the imaginative world this young acolyte of U.S. policy has learned to inhabit?

The human-rights lawyer with our delegation asks what makes El Salvador a "success story." She observes that the U.S.-brokered peace accords in El Salvador bestowed immunity from prosecution upon the military and civilian architects of twelve years of repression: the engineers of approximately 70,000 civilian deaths per U.N. estimates. She wonders aloud how that result squares with U.S. government commitments, through international covenants like the U.N. Charter and the Organization of American States Convention on Human Rights, never to allow immunity from prosecution for gross human rights violations. Will it be U.S. policy to grant tacit impunity to the architects of similarly horrific crimes in Haiti?

The attaché looks us over with a flinty calculation. Perhaps, I imagine, he is trying to fathom how much we actually know about the State Department's role in recent events. At last he offers a broad, disarming smile. "Ah, that's the perennial question of the Western hemisphere, isn't it?" he asks. "Whether to seek vengeance against the 'bad guys,' or to let bygones be bygones and get on with creating a Western-style democracy."⁵

We talk for a few minutes more, but our questions get no further than that half-smirking reference to armed teams of rapists and murderers as "the bad guys," and a facile equation of accountability—the minimum threshold of justice required under international law—with irrational impulses to "vengeance."

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail," Jesus declared: "they shall be satisfied" (Matt. 5:6, REB). The Haitian women we met in Pétionville spoke with throats parched with that thirst for justice. For at least one official carrying out U.S. policy in Port-au-Prince, on the other hand, it seems the only thirst that matters can readily be slaked with the offer of another Coca-Cola.

Posing a Perennial Question

My concern in the following pages is with the question of justice. Justice is not only the "perennial question" that haunts U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere. Justice is the question, or better, the contest at the heart of what Marxist critic Fredric Jameson has called the "single vast unfinished plot" that is human history. That plot, which Jameson characterizes as "the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity," is the ultimate horizon of all human cultural expressions, and of their interpretation. The consequence Jameson draws is that our conventional habit of distinguishing "cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not"—religious texts, for example—is "something worse than an error." It is a symptom of the pervasive logic of capitalist culture which privatizes individual experience and insulates the individual imagination from the horizons of political change.⁶

Jameson's point is perhaps nowhere more evident than with regard to the interpretation of Paul's letter to the Romans. Contestation over justice is at the heart of the letter, but that fact has been long obscured by the Christian dogmatic tradition. Library shelves groan under the weight of volumes insisting that the *dikaiosynē tou theou* of which Paul speaks is a purely theological concept, the "righteousness" that is a transcendent attribute of God alone; or else it is, as an expression of that righteousness, the "justification" that God imputes to human sinners, regardless of their action for good or ill. These phenomena are so sublime, so abstract, and so beyond analogy with mere human justice that only carefully trained theological professionals may comprehend and interpret them accurately.

That dogmatically determined construal of the letter has been challenged, however, first by liberation theologians in Central America. In *Marxism and the Bible* (1974), José Porfirio Miranda argued that justice between human beings was the "revolutionary and absolutely central message" of Romans, a message "customarily avoided by exegesis."⁷ In *The Amnesty of Grace* (1991), Elsa Tamez protested the abstraction, universalism, and individualism of the classical doctrine of justification by faith, which when applied in the abstract to the realities of Latin America, "where the most obvious sin is structural" and where "the sins that kill are very tangible," yielded disastrous results: "justification viewed from an abstract, individual, and generic plane is good news more for the oppressors than for the poor." For Tamez, the consequence for responsible interpretation of Paul's thought was a simple and straightforward commitment: "to reject every approach that favors the rich to the detriment of the poor."⁸

Subsequently, North American scholars have argued for a *re-politicized* reading of Romans (that is, for a reversal of previous reading practices that *de-politicized* the letter). In *Liberating Paul* (1994), I protested the theological "mystification" of Paul and the "Babylonian captivity of the letter to the Romans" in the powerful wake of Reformation dogmatics, developments that marginalized the political aspects of Paul's thought.⁹ In *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul*, Theodore W. Jennings Jr. has lamented the restriction of the reading of Romans "to a confessional/ecclesiastical ghetto of doctrinal interest"; the result, he protests, is that "Paul's concern for the question of justice has been transformed into a question of interior or private righteousness." As a result of this theological manhandling on the part of the apostle's "ecclesial and dogmatic jailers," "the question of justice has been effectively silenced, substituting in its place a doctrine of justification that absolves the believer from the claim and call of justice."¹⁰ In their commentary on Romans, John B. Cobb Jr. and David J. Lull observe that "in the Roman Empire, what people today call 'religion' and 'politics' were inseparable"; they find in Romans a vision "that sharply contradicted the political theology" of Paul's day.¹¹ Most recently, in his *Hermeneia* commentary, Robert Jewett has declared that "the argument of Romans revolves around the question of which rule is truly righteous and which gospel has the power to make the world truly peaceful."¹²

But these perspectives on the letter are not yet prevalent in scholarship, or in North American Christianity. The dominant reading of Romans among Reformation churches, emphasizing justification by grace through faith alone, has often had a quiescent effect, serving to neutralize impulses toward collective action for social change. At the same time, the cultural currents that wash through more evangelical and Fundamentalist churches and, increasingly, throughout U.S. political life promote the powerful impression that the righteousness that so preoccupies the biblical God is a matter of strictly personal morality and of adherence to a strident nationalism. This understanding of "righteousness," Helmut Koester has observed, "functions as an important support for the structures of the state," calling forth proper decorum and due respect, especially from the religious. However, Koester protests that the moralistic interpretation of Paul is "impossible": Paul's God was "not interested in righteous individuals," but wanted "to create righteousness and justice for people, for communities, and for nations."¹³

The reading of Paul against which Koester protests is readily illustrated. Perhaps no biblical text is more often deployed "as an important support for the structures of the state" than the notorious exhortation to "be subject to the governing authorities" in Rom 13:1–7. A single personal anecdote may serve the point.

Hannibal, Missouri, March 2003

The weekend after George W. Bush ordered the bombing and military invasion of Iraq in what is customarily called the Second Iraq War, I walked through downtown Hannibal, Missouri, a town that relies for tourism on its fame as the home town of American author and humorist Mark Twain. Like many town centers across the United States, the Hannibal main street was decked out in U.S. flags, yellow ribbons, and placards urging passersby to "Support Our Troops." One solitary sign of dissent hung in a coffee shop window, a single typed page inviting citizens to an evening "discussion" of the war.

The woman who had posted the modest invitation told me that neighbors had already challenged her "anti-Americanism." "It's hard to question the war in Hannibal," she said. When I asked how that squared with the town's public celebration of the best known member of the Anti-Imperialist League, she answered, "that would be news here. Most people in Hannibal don't know anything about Mark Twain beyond *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*."

A tour of the local museums bore out her point. An exhibit dedicated to Mark Twain's literary career focused almost exclusively on his humorous writings. I found two references to Twain's literary tours of Europe, but not a hint that he had spoken regularly and often in Europe, as well as in the United States, on behalf of the Anti-Imperialist League. On one wall, a turn-of-the-century newspaper cartoon depicted Twain seated upon a throne, being paid court by the "Crowned Heads of

Europe"; behind his throne, a single figure labeled "Leopold" sat dejected, his head on his fist. The museum caption described Twain's fame in Europe but offered no explanation of Leopold. No one would learn in this museum of the horrific atrocities carried out in the Congo by King Leopold of Belgium, or of Twain's fervent efforts, alongside other activists in Europe and the United States, to make those atrocities an international cause célèbre.¹⁴

Newspaper advertisements and hastily erected signs around town invited residents and visitors to attend "prayer services for our troops" at any of a number of local churches. In most other American cities, the signs might have been unexceptional, but they struck an ironic note in Hannibal, where every gift shop and museum store sold several different editions of Mark Twain's short, bitterly satirical essay, *War Prayer*. The essay tells of a mysterious stranger who interrupts the eloquent prayers of a local pastor on a Sunday morning and points out to the congregation that an unspoken prayer has accompanied their spoken words to heaven. Their prayer for victory is also a prayer for the God of love to blight the land and the homes of the enemy, to leave widows and orphans desolate and without hope.¹⁵

I saw no invitations from churches to discuss the *War Prayer*. Except for that single conversation in a coffee shop, there was no indication that anyone in Mark Twain's home town was the least troubled by invitations to join in prayers (in the phrasing of a ubiquitous bumper sticker) to "Support *Our* Troops." Indeed, the only literary allusion informing the cultural discourse of Hannibal, Missouri, accompanied one local pastor's letter in the local newspaper. He wrote, "It is the duty of all Christians to stand with their president in a time of war (Rom 13:1-7)."

If Hannibal were exceptional, I would not recount the experience. My point is that even in one town where one might have expected the flicker of a thoroughly American anti-war sentiment to be visible, discussion could be managed, and dissent largely precluded (in public as well as in the churches), by an appeal to Paul's letter to the Romans.

Reading Differently

The argument of this book is that from its very first lines, Paul's letter burns with the incendiary proclamation of God's justice, and with a searing critique of the injustice (*adikia*) of those who smother and suppress the truth (1:17-18). The themes that dominate Romans are *political* topics: the imagination of a global order achieved through the obedience of nations (see chap. 1 below); the arrogance and hypocrisy of wicked rulers who "suppress the truth" (chap. 2); the tension between justice and the pretensions to "mercy" shown by the conqueror to the vanquished (chap. 3); the serviceability of religious values and popular devotion (chap. 4); and questions of realism, hope, and the common good (chap. 5). These themes reveal

how powerfully Paul and the assemblies he addressed were caught up in the swirling currents of Roman imperial culture. That culture, like all imperial cultures, ancient and modern, was preoccupied with what the late cultural critic Edward Said called "notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination." Said's insistence that we "take empire seriously" and abandon the pretense of neutrality regarding its effects has helped to inspire the rise of postcolonial criticism in biblical studies. One of the leading figures in this development, Fernando F. Segovia, applies the principle by insisting that a fully contextualized reading of the New Testament texts must address "the reality of empire" as "an omnipresent, inescapable, and overwhelming sociopolitical reality."¹⁶

Taking empire seriously in biblical interpretation requires looking in two directions at once. Looking back at the ancient Roman Empire, we will attend to what Marxist historian G. E. M. de Ste. Croix has called "a massive system of exploitation of the great majority by the ruling classes," and of the myriad ways, which Ste. Croix and others have ably documented, in which imperial rule, and the ideological representation of the emperor's role in particular, served to maintain and reinforce a thoroughly "parasitic" economic system.¹⁷ Looking simultaneously at our own context, we must be as alert to the "cultural logic of late capitalism" that informs and shapes contemporary life, including what sociologists have termed the "production of the sacred" in public religion and the academic disciplines involved in biblical studies.¹⁸

There are significant points of analogy between ancient Roman imperialism and the complex fabric of contemporary imperialism, by which I mean both the global military supremacy that is official U.S. policy and the globalizing capitalism that it serves.¹⁹ There is admittedly a danger here of anachronism in comparing two very different historical contexts; but a greater danger would be a failure to take seriously the resemblance between the ways distinct ideologies serve to legitimate and naturalize the dominant social order in both ancient Roman and contemporary U.S. imperialism. In both contexts, for example, representations of benevolence, paternalism, and authority, focused in the figure of a single wise, caring, autocratic ruler, serve to mask the exploitative dynamics of the economic order. Precisely because my concern is an ancient text that continues to be invested with tremendous authority in the U.S. culture, understanding the dominant ideological functions of rhetoric in both contexts is an urgent task.²⁰

Because so many of us—in the U.S. culture broadly, in American churches especially, but in academic circles as well—suffer what Said decried as the "astonishing sense of weightlessness" regarding "the gravity of history,"²¹ the effort that follows, to read Paul's letter in the context of Roman imperial ideology, may at first glance appear eccentric. The less traveled path on which I embark in the following pages has seen increasing traffic in recent years, however, in the work of scholarly colleagues in the Paul and Politics section of the Society of Biblical Literature, and beyond.²² Those colleagues will recognize my debts to their efforts to take empire seriously; others

will recognize how much I owe as well, to advances in the growing fields of rhetorical criticism and postcolonial interpretation, and to the interest in "people's history" and the hidden transcripts of subordinated or marginalized groups.²³

The greatest challenge to a political reading of Romans is the broad assumption that we already know what Romans is about. It is, we commonly assume, self-evidently a debate with Judaism, its argument directed primarily against Jewish works-righteousness (on an older, Lutheran reading), or against the Jewish ethnocentrism that mobilized a concerted Jewish opposition to Paul's intolerably inclusive gospel (according to the "New Perspective"). But the letter is explicitly addressed to *non-Judeans*, representatives of "the nations" (*ta ethnē*, commonly rendered "Gentiles": see below). In *The Rhetoric of Romans* (1990), I argued that given that clear and explicit address (see 1:5–7, 11–15; 15:14–16), the rhetoric of Romans must be read as directed to that audience. As Stanley K. Stowers later made the point in *A Rereading of Romans* (1994), the habit of importing an implied Jewish audience serves dogmatic and apologetic purposes but flouts the clear rhetorical indicators of the letter. Ben Witherington III has taken the same approach in his socio-rhetorical commentary to Romans.²⁴ I will presume those more extensive arguments regarding the letter's non-Judean audience in what follows.

But more is at stake in our interpretation than an accurate reading of the letter's argumentation. Too often, theological readings of Romans have relied on historically untenable stereotypes of Jews and Judaism. The not-yet universal recognition of that fact has both fueled and complicated the modern study of Paul. Conventional readings also serve—as they have served for centuries—to reinforce a distinctive *Christian* self-understanding, as if it had been the apostle's purpose to provide Gentile Christians, both ancient and modern, a sort of theological pedigree for their legitimacy. Indeed, a long train of interpreters, beginning with Krister Stendahl, have asserted that such defense or legitimation of the Gentile church was the letter's foremost purpose.²⁵ In this way, the force of Paul's rhetoric is deflected away from *us*—the modern, comfortable, more-or-less secularized first-world Christians who remain the primary consumers of Pauline scholarship, and for whom questions of Israel's destiny and the observance of the Jewish law are usually a matter of only moderate academic interest—onto *them*, the Jews who "failed" to accept the Pauline gospel of universalism that we presume as self-evident, and whom we can afford to regard, from a safe emotional distance, with a polite blend of curiosity and condescension.

As often as we treat Romans differently from Paul's other letters, imagining that it is not a letter of urgent exhortation as they are, we who imagine ourselves to be the modern heirs of his universalistic legacy ensure that we have nothing to fear from it. Whether we are properly tolerant Christians or appropriately liberal academics, or both, we can rest assured that Paul has nothing critical to say to *us*. Indeed, if his purpose was to defend the incipient Gentile-Christian movement—"people like us," after all—from the irrational opposition of prejudiced rivals, then we can read

Romans with a certain self-congratulatory satisfaction. His words do not touch on our privileges or presumptions; they rather commend our prerogatives.

But this is not the way we should hear Romans. To the contrary, this letter challenged, criticized, and confronted what Paul considered troubling aspects of the nascent movement of Christ-believers in his day. One goal in the following pages is to dispel some of the theological fog surrounding Romans, and thus to overcome some of "the astonishing sense of weightlessness" in Pauline studies with regard to the gravity of imperial power. If we do not immediately hear the counter-imperial aspects of Paul's letter, perhaps it is because we are predisposed, by the constricted, privatized, and domesticated contexts in which Paul's letters are most usually read, to perceive in them only a narrow bandwidth of what we consider religious discourse.²⁶ If one effect of this work is to challenge such notions, it shall have served an important purpose. For those of us who recognize that American imperial ambition and myths of national innocence have distorted and disrupted the witness of contemporary faith communities, and especially Christian churches, to an alternative citizenship, few messages could be more urgent.

Toward a Contemporary *Sachkritik*

If we intend to approach the letter to the Romans with the sort of theological seriousness that Karl Barth offered in the early twentieth century, we will need, like him, to read Romans alert to "the situation in which we ourselves actually are." Barth encountered in Romans "that which urgently and finally concerns the very marrow of human civilization."²⁷ In Romans, I contend, we see Paul's critical engagement with the claims of imperial ideology and with the corrosive effects of those claims within the Roman congregations of Christ-believers. The material realities in which we live require that a contemporary *Sachkritik*, our own effort to penetrate to "the inner dialectic of the matter," must take with utmost seriousness the ideological forces that shape our own perceptions, determine our own attitudes, and elicit our own compliance (or at least our acquiescence), as well.

No legitimate reading of Romans in our contemporary situation can remain oblivious to the effects of empire today. Precisely because of the ideological forces that constrain our perceptions, however, such a *Sachkritik* will not come easily to many of us.

Reading the signs of the times

Over the last quarter century, we who live in the global North, who are accustomed to reading the Bible in conditions of unprecedented comfort and privilege,

have been faced with a new challenge: to learn to hear the biblical voices anew by attending to how our neighbors living at the periphery of imperial culture hear and experience them. If we open ourselves to them, the bearers of so-called theologies of liberation and postcolonial criticism can alert us to the sociopolitical forces at work in our own lives as well as theirs. From our global neighbors, we can learn—if we will listen—that “no theology and no institutional church can be examined in a vacuum; they must be considered in the context of the political and social reality in which they exist and act.” So wrote José Comblin, a liberation theologian working in Brazil, for whom “political and social reality” meant living under “American empire and . . . its farthest-reaching export—the national security state.”²⁸ Writing in 1979, Comblin had Latin American realities particularly in view; but his comments apply as well to the fateful U.S. support for other national security states like the Baathist regime in Iraq through the 1980s, or the far more lethal military regime in Indonesia through the 1990s, to select but two representative cases.

Our neighbors in the global South, and a swelling chorus of prophetic voices in the North, implore us to take in a disturbing truth. The militarized empire of global capitalism, the very system that has brought so many of us unparalleled prosperity, which so many of us even regard as sacred, continues to devastate their lives and the lives of their children. It is hard to take in that truth. It is hard, in part, because it is so much easier for us to recognize the evils of *other* systems—formerly, of Soviet expansionism, or now, of the organized terrorism aimed at U.S. Middle East policies—than the evils of the system in which we live, and from which we reap undeniable material benefits.

It is hard to take in that truth, in part, because as the martyred Jesuit academic Ignacio Ellacuría remarked, the “fundamental dynamic” of this system, its “pitiless exploitation,” “intrinsic malice,” and “predatory ferocity,” are ordinarily visible in their true magnitude “only beyond the boundaries of the rich countries, which in numerous ways export the evils of capitalism to the exploited periphery.”²⁹ It is possible for those living at the center of imperial culture to avoid seeing the effects of empire. One must immediately add the qualification that the “exploited periphery” exists at the blighted heart of many U.S. cities as well. Three decades ago, black theologians in the United States recognized that the regime of “exploitative, profit-oriented capitalism is a way of ordering life fundamentally alien to human value in general and to black humanity in particular. Racism and capitalism have set the stage for despoliation of natural and human resources all around the world,” not least in our own cities.³⁰ The pernicious illusion nevertheless prevails that the exploited are personally and morally culpable for the ruinous effects of their own exploitation.

It is, finally, hard to take in this unwelcome truth because omnipresent, corporate-owned electronic media surround us with the messages that our system has won because of its own inherent superiority; that the miserable have earned their misery through sloth; that the sufferings that require our most urgent action

are insults to our own national pride; and that our most important preoccupation must be constant, unremitting consumption (represented to us as “our way of life”).³¹

However unfamiliar and uncomfortable the perspective to which our global neighbors invite us, however, theological seriousness requires facing the material realities of our age and scrutinizing the dominant ideological representations of those realities on offer all around us. We should not imagine, with a post-modern sensibility, that attending to the themes of imperial ideology is simply one interpretive choice among others. I follow Fredric Jameson in regarding the political interpretation of literary texts like Romans “not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today . . . but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation.” Holding Romans aloof from political interpretation as if it were fundamentally some other kind of writing, or as if political interpretation could not finally comprehend what was most essential to the letter, only reinforces the artificial distinction between “public” (and political) and “private” (and religious). Ultimately, insulating the interpretation of Romans from political and ideological criticism (or marginalizing political criticism as only one option among others) serves to reconfirm those ideological constraints that isolate religion from playing any meaningful role in history. “The only effective liberation from such constraint,” Jameson writes, “begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, that everything is ‘in the last analysis’ political.”³² In similar terms, the theologians of liberation have called for decades for the recognition that first-world theology is as completely ideological a product as anything emerging from the periphery of empire.

An ideological-critical reading

Neither, however, may we imagine that we can stand with Paul at some transcendent point, looking down upon the plane of history as if he and we were completely free of its constraints. A *Sachkritik* attentive to the ideological forces at work in a historical situation necessarily attends to what Jameson calls the *strategies of containment* by which those forces in Paul’s day, and in our own, repress certain possibilities from consciousness. Jameson argues that because of the constraining power of ideology, a text often points obliquely beyond itself to possibilities that “remain unrealized in the surface of the text.” It follows that we cannot content ourselves to read the surface of a text like Romans, but must read beneath and behind it, or better, *through* it to get at the fundamental contestation of power that is inscribed in it.³³ We must read against the grain, listening for what remains unsaid (in Jameson’s terms, what has been repressed) as much as what is said.³⁴

That proposal is uncontroversial in the study of other writings from the early Roman period. We know that our classical sources left much unsaid that did not align with the interests of the dominant classes. Exceptions prove the rule: there were stridently anti-Roman voices raised in the first century, like the fiercely defiant British warriors Calgacus and Boudicca, for example. But we know of them only because long after they had fallen to their Roman conquerors, Tacitus attributed to them speeches that amplified his account of the expansion of Roman supremacy. We know that some Judeans of the Second Temple period protested Roman arrogance and violence, though none of our sources provide access to direct and explicit criticism of Rome. It is universally recognized that the Habakkuk Peshet from Qumran assails Romans in a bitter indictment, but they remain veiled under the label *Kittim*. *Fourth Maccabees* expresses hostility to Roman rule, though disguised as an encomium on the "self-control" and "philosophy" of rebels of another age.³⁵ Even Josephus acknowledges the eloquence of anti-Roman rebels, though he demurs from providing samples (*War* 2.348).

Paul issued no call to arms against Rome; he rallied no rebel garrison. If, however, we attend to those fissures in the text where a unified surface reading becomes impossible, we can recognize subterranean forces at work beneath Romans. Those forces are the object of our investigation. The rhetoric of Romans shows that Paul participated in a cultural transcript, drawing on the repertoires of Judean scripture and apocalyptic writings, that was inescapably in conflict with the empire's absolutizing claims on allegiance.³⁶

A political reading begins from the specificity of a given text in its full historical context, grasped, Jameson proposes, "as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" inherent in that historical context.³⁷ In the case of Romans, I contend, these are the contradictions inherent in a situation in which Roman imperial ideology has come into conflict with alternative understandings of justice, order, and community among the empire's subjects. At a second, more general level, the text is apprehended as "an individual *parole* or utterance" within the broader collective and class discourses that "fight it out within the general unity of a shared code."³⁸ We will not arbitrarily limit the range of discourses that constitute the context of Romans by setting the letter over against contemporary Judean writings alone, then, as has been the repeated practice in past theological interpretation. Rather we will situate Paul's letter *and* the writings of his Judean and non-Judean contemporaries in a broader context of varying responses to Roman rule. An ideological-critical reading of Romans will investigate the effects in the letter of conflicting modes of production in the early Roman Empire, just as Norman Gottwald has taught us to recognize, in the Hebrew Bible, the evidence of seismic upheavals and collisions between conflicting modes of production and their corresponding ideological representations under the Persian Empire.³⁹

But precisely because we are caught up in history as much as were Paul and his contemporaries; precisely because we have *not* reached the recently heralded "end

of history," but find ourselves engaged, as they were, in an unfinished drama in which competing visions of history's fulfillment are pitted against one another, for this reason we recognize with Jameson that the ultimate horizon of political interpretation is the sweep of history itself. A text like Romans becomes an occasion to recognize in our own day, as in Paul's, the deep struggle through human history that is manifested, from the point of view of Marxist analysis, in conflicts between different material modes of production, but is experienced by its participants as the long-enduring struggle "to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity" (or as Paul phrased it, to experience "the redemption of our bodies," Rom 8:23). A fully political *Sachkritik* of Romans involves our exploration of what is "unsaid," unspeakable, and repressed in our own ideological environment as well. Postcolonial interpreters refer to the critical theological tasks of unmasking, unveiling, and uncovering the deep logic that legitimizes exploitation in our own day as well, especially where the legitimization of injustice bears the sheen of a divine patina. Ultimately, the "decolonizing" of modern biblical interpretation requires decolonizing *us* who are the first-world producers and consumers of biblical interpretation.⁴⁰

Agreements and divergences

The project I have just described requires situating the rhetoric of Romans within a broader rhetorical context, an environment where discourse was shaped and constrained by disparities of power. In the following pages, I will not provide anything like a running commentary on Paul's letter. There are any number of valuable commentaries on Romans available, the most formidable being Robert Jewett's recent *Hermeneia* commentary, and I will not try to reproduce their efforts. Given the space limitations of the present work, neither will I seek to catalogue points of agreement or disagreement, or polemically to argue for the superiority of my reading or the inadequacy of others where we disagree. My goal is simply to present a coherent reading of the letter that describes both the constraints on discourse, and countervailing impulses to resist those constraints, in a particular imperial situation.

It may nevertheless be helpful at the outset to situate my reading on the landscape of current interpretations of Romans. First, I realize that proposing a political reading of the letter may seem tendentious to some. Equally, my repeated references to the deleterious effects of imperial culture may seem prejudicial to readers for whom the accomplishments of the Augustan age (or our own) are properly objects of admiration. As Karl Galinsky observes in the introduction to his monumental study *Augustan Culture*, "our interpretations of the past are much influenced by our experience with contemporary society, politics, and culture." Currents in twentieth-century European politics have played a decisive role in the perceptions of Augustus and his age,⁴¹ and we should expect nothing different in a time when

the self-declared imperial ambitions of contemporary American policymakers are also deeply controversial. Whether we should understand the rise of the Principate and the so-called *Pax Romana* primarily as a narrative of economic and political exploitation achieved through force, or as one of the most important accomplishments in the history of Western civilization—or both, on the grounds (well documented among the proponents of the Roman Empire) that genuine peace can be achieved only through force—these are judgments about which I will not try to change the reader's mind. (That Roman emperors and governors themselves described their motives as including the economic exploitation of the provinces is, of course, a simple matter of fact.)

Similarly, Augustus consolidated tremendous military, economic, political, moral, and sacred power, gaining broad acceptance for his rule on the basis of his own *auctoritas*—the “material, intellectual, and moral superiority” that provides “the ultimate power of the emperor on the moral level.”⁴² Whether that achievement has any lessons for our own day—when sweeping executive powers, including the exercise of personal discretion in interpreting the constitutional reach of those powers, have been claimed for the president of the world's greatest military power—is a question regarding which I will not attempt to persuade the reader, though I believe certain resemblances in the two situations are compelling.⁴³

Romans is widely regarded today as addressed to a specific situation in Rome. Tensions between Judean and non-Judean members of the assemblies gathering in Christ's name threatened Paul's understanding of his own apostolic responsibility. Paul addressed that situation with rhetoric that appealed to a common fund of shared values and convictions, including both Judean scripture (which he quoted here more than in any other letter) and the traditions of the early Christ-movement. So far I am in complete agreement with an emerging consensus.

I shall argue further that Paul also invoked recognizable themes from imperial propaganda, usually in such a way as implicitly to challenge them. I take those invocations and allusions as evidence that the situation in the Roman assemblies was shaped, not primarily by tensions somehow inherent in the proximity of different ethnic groups, as current social-scientific readings have suggested, but to *perceptions* and *themes* in the broader ideology and culture of the Augustan and post-Augustan age.

As we shall see, a number of recent interpreters have alerted us to the political implications of some of Paul's vocabulary, for example “messiah” (*christos*), or “lord” (*kyrios*), or “assembly” (*ekklēsia*). Others have shown that in a highly agonistic culture such as ancient Rome, where an intense competition for honor was played out within fixed relationships of superior and inferior, Paul's exhortations to mutual respect and deference would have been dramatically countercultural. These observations are important, but they tend to portray the tension between Paul's rhetoric and imperial ideology as indirect and rather incidental. I argue, in contrast, that the argument of Romans as a whole collides *inescapably* with the claims of empire, even if that collision is never expressed in explicit terms.

In previous writings, I have described Paul's as an “anti-imperial gospel” and his theology as subversive of imperial values. Others have criticized such characterizations as imprecise and anachronistic. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has argued convincingly that labeling Paul's gospel “counter-imperial” prematurely rescues Paul for “liberationist” causes, obscures or avoids the extent to which “even resistance literature” can “re-inscribe the structures of domination against which it seeks to argue,” and relieves the interpreter of the duty “to inquire as to how such inscribed imperial language functioned in the past, and still functions today.”⁴⁴ Though I intend to show that some aspects of Paul's rhetoric in Romans were subversive of some of the claims of imperial propaganda, I recognize that Paul never provides a systematic or comprehensive critique of the emperor (whom he never names) or of the empire as such. The empire as such is never his direct target: his goal is to lay a claim on the allegiance of his listeners with which the rival claims of empire inevitably interfered. It is not just that his argumentation is occasionally oblique. Paul's own thinking and rhetoric also was shaped by the ideological constraints of his age. He did not float serenely above his historical situation, as an approach to his letters as “inspired scripture” implies. To borrow an apt phrase from Schüssler Fiorenza, Paul's thought was as fully *kyriarchal*, in its own way, as that of any imperial propagandist (see further chap. 1).⁴⁵

In so far as his thought was shaped by the contestation over power that surrounded him, and in which imperial themes and tropes were dominant, Paul resembled his Judean contemporaries. In strictly historical terms, then, I consider it anachronistic to read Romans as an early specimen of Christian theology. The letter is rather one expression of the range of Judean response to the Roman Empire. What makes Romans distinct from other contemporary Judean writings is not Paul's distance from other forms of Judaism, but the peculiar—one is tempted to say, unique—situation Paul addressed, namely, the recent ascendancy of a non-Judean majority in the local Roman assemblies of what was initially a Judean messianic movement (with all that implied vis-à-vis Roman hegemony). I read the letter not as a Christian critique of Judaism, or a defense of Gentile Christianity, but as a Judean critique of an incipient non-Judean Christianity in which the pressures of imperial ideology were a decisive factor.

Several of the terms just used, especially Gentile and Christian, are admittedly anachronistic, and I will avoid them in what follows, or use them only advisedly. That may prove disconcerting to readers who expect to learn from these pages what Paul has to say to Christians. That is all to the good. We are well warned against interpretations that privilege the voice of Paul in artificial isolation from his own historical context and that thus serve, however unintentionally, to reinforce the most baleful effects of the Pauline legacy in contemporary society.⁴⁶ Such principled warnings stand over against everything that follows. Seeking to interpret Paul in the context of Roman imperial power in his own day does not relieve us of the critical and ethical responsibilities we bear regarding imperialism in our own day. We must, at last, answer for ourselves.

A final qualification regarding my use of "Judean" to translate the Greek *Ioudaios*: Some scholars have recently proposed distinguishing between the term *Judeans*, an ethnic and geographic term for a member of the people hailing from Judea, and the term *Jews*, denoting cultural and religious adherence to the way of life of that people. Shaye Cohen has argued that it is anachronistic to speak of "Jews" before about 100 B.C.E.⁴⁷ Philip F. Esler chooses to speak of "Judeans" in Paul's day as well, as a way of conveying *both* the ethnic-geographic and the religious components of Judean identity that "both insiders and outsiders regarded as fundamental," something for which he argues our contemporary usage of "Jew" is inadequate.⁴⁸ It is in just this respect that I employ the term *Judean* in what follows, though I do not in any way mean to question or deny the historical continuity between the *Ioudaioi* who were Paul's contemporaries and the modern Jews who are mine.⁴⁹ The burden against which I press throughout this book is the weight of the centuries-long projection into Paul's day of subsequent Christian stereotypes regarding Jews and Judaism. I use *Judean* here as a way of reminding the reader and myself that we are dealing with ancient terms, *Ioudaios* and *Iudaeus*, which were used both by those who were and by others who were not *Ioudaioi* to define what being *Ioudaios* meant. My interest is in letting first-century Judeans, Paul above all, speak for themselves.

— The Rhetoric of Romans and the Rhetoric of Rome —

A political *Sachkritik* of Romans requires us to situate Paul's rhetoric amid surrounding discourses as precisely as possible. This, in turn, requires attending to the way disparities in power constrain discourse in a colonial situation. Unfortunately, these are tasks for which traditional rhetorical criticism has proven itself flatly incapable.

Rhetorical-critical dead ends

Because of the legacy of Christian apologetics and Reformation polemics, Romans usually has been or is read as a religious document in which the apostle Paul sets out his distinctive theological views concerning Christian identity and practice, in implicit contrast, if not direct opposition, to the Jewish religion. This approach to Romans necessarily relies upon characterizations of Jews, Judaism, and the Jewish Law as somehow deficient in comparison with Paul's "universal," "law-free" gospel. The Christian theological reading of Romans has also largely set the limits of the rhetorical-critical study of the letter. The widespread perception of the letter's double character, that is, as a letter written to non-Judeans that nonetheless is primarily concerned with Jewish themes, clearly begs rhetorical-critical investigation.⁵⁰

But only rarely has rhetorical criticism led interpreters to question the assumptions, inherited from Reformation dogmatics, that the letter is fundamentally Paul's presentation of a doctrine of salvation, and that this doctrine is fundamentally incompatible with, and opposed to, the Judaism of his contemporaries.

The result is that for a majority of interpreters, the letter remains a theological sample by means of which Paul seeks to introduce himself or his gospel, to "show [the Romans] *in advance* what his gospel *will* be," to offer "an *example* of the kind of preaching or teaching he *will* practice when among them," to present his gospel to them so that they might "know more about its character and his mode of argumentation," to introduce to them "the teaching activity Paul *hopes to do* at Rome" or "the gospel *to be . . . proclaimed* [in Spain]," including sample admonitions regarding a way of life "that *would* ensure the success" of the Spanish mission; to "[provide] a sustained account of his understanding of the gospel" to "justify his message and mission" by "clarifying and defending his beliefs," to "inform the church [in Rome] about his missionary theology" so that they would "know his thinking."

These common characterizations of the letter, couched predominantly in the subjunctive mood, as a theological "position paper," a "think piece" drawn from the apostle's portfolio, have an impressive following.⁵¹ They coincide with a perception of the letter as written under circumstances free of constraint, a perception particularly convenient for generalizations about the letter's content as Paul's "basic theological position . . . more or less completely set forth" in its "most complete and complex synthesis," "the most sustained and reflective statement of Paul's own theology"—again, views representative of a wide range of interpreters.⁵² But the characterizations I have just cited have scant basis in the text itself. Paul says nothing in the letter to indicate that he is presenting his own ideas to garner his readers' approval of himself or his mission.

Unfortunately, rhetorical-critical interpretations of Romans have often done little more than glean from the classical Greek and Roman rhetorical handbooks a novel technical nomenclature for an outline of the letter that has already been established, without the benefit of rhetorical categories, in dogmatic readings. For example, the conventional identification of Romans 1:16–17 as the theme or thesis of the letter, in defiance of the formal and syntactical features of those verses, is sometimes expressed now as a rhetorical-critical insight, though without any more substantiation than an appeal to a "consensus" among interpreters.⁵³ Similarly, some interpreters tend to describe the letter in terms resembling the genre of the philosophical treatise or letter essay, though it bears none of the hallmarks of the ancient letter essay.⁵⁴ Others seek to identify the rhetorical genre of the letter according to the categories of the ancient rhetorical handbooks, but falter on prior assumptions regarding the letter's purpose.⁵⁵

In contrast, I expect the ancient handbooks to be of only limited usefulness in determining the genre of Romans. The handbooks were designed, after all, for

the fairly formal expectations of public oratory in the Greco-Roman world. But as scholars of classical rhetoric themselves have reminded us, many forms of speech cannot be fitted into the fairly rigid categories of the handbooks: notably, the authoritative, often spontaneous, and ecstatic speech that is characteristic of what George A. Kennedy called "religious" rhetoric.⁵⁶ Romans is persuasive rhetoric, but it is presented in terms of the *announcement* of the effective power of God (*euangelizesthai*), a mode of rhetoric that finds scant treatment in the classical handbooks. Paul's reliance on arguments from Israel's scripture and his resort to the category of divinely revealed "mystery" (11:25) point us toward what Aristotle called "inartificial" proofs.⁵⁷ Paul's invocation of sacred power—when he introduces himself as one called and set apart by God (1:1, 5, *passim*); when he declares that the power of God "is being revealed" in his proclamation (1:15) and that the justice and the wrath of God are likewise "being revealed" (1:16–18); his reference at the end of the letter to "what Christ has accomplished in me in the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit" (15:18–19)—similarly highlight a distinctive "apodeictic" aspect of his rhetoric, that is, his evocation of the divine "proof" or "manifestation" (*apodeixis*) of heavenly power. Paul explicitly characterizes his rhetoric to the Corinthian assembly in just these terms, as a "demonstration [*apodeixis*] of spirit and power" rather than reliance on "persuasive (words) of wisdom" (1 Cor 2:4).⁵⁸ A similar rhetoric characterizes Romans. The exigence, the perceived need calling forth this letter, is God's active purpose in calling Paul to bring about "faithful obedience among the nations" (1:5).⁵⁹

Because the classical handbooks presumed the power relationships of the established civic order, they provide no categories for describing rhetoric in tension with that order. Judicial rhetoric was the rhetoric of the law court, where the interests of the propertied class were inevitably served. Deliberative rhetoric was appropriate to the public assembly, from which those without property were excluded. Shame and honor, the themes of epideictic or ceremonial oratory, similarly were defined by the ruling class, as Mark Reasoner and Robert Jewett have observed.⁶⁰ Indeed, the handbooks assume that persuasive speech was a possibility only among the "civilized." From the perspective of a master rhetorician like Cicero, the only language the rabble understood was force;⁶¹ and the casual air with which Aristotle discussed the speaker's options regarding testimony torn from slaves under torture, to which he attributed no inherent evidentiary value whatsoever, similarly speaks volumes regarding the relation the handbooks assume to exist between persuasion and coercion.⁶² We should not assume such resources will be of direct or uncomplicated assistance for our understanding of an "invasive" or disruptive rhetoric such as Paul's in Romans, a rhetoric that announces the revelation of "God's wrath . . . against the impiety and injustice of those who by their injustice suppress the truth," who although claiming to be wise, have been made fools by God's "darkening" of their minds (Rom 1:18, 21–22).

Romans as exhortation

Finally, although the ancient rhetoricians occasionally recognized the phenomenon of exhortation by letter, it played no role in their discussions of formal public discourse. The hard-and-fast distinction made in the handbooks between epideictic rhetoric (ceremonial rhetoric, concerned with praise and blame) and deliberative (concerning advantageous and disadvantageous action) simply breaks down with regard to the genre of the hortatory or paraenetic letter.⁶³ But that is exactly what Romans is. It is no coincidence that appeals to the handbooks often serve characterizations of the letter as a last will and testament, a think-piece, or a theological self-introduction. These readings necessarily minimize explicit statements of the letter's purpose in 1:11–15 and 15:14–16, and fail to recognize that Paul's diplomatic language in just those passages employs a well-known convention in Greco-Roman moral exhortation (see further chap. 1).

Further, as Victor P. Furnish showed a generation ago, exhortation is not limited to a "paraenetic section" at the end of Romans, but gives structure to the argumentation of the whole letter.⁶⁴ The appeal in Romans 12 called hearers "to a new life exactly opposite" the life Paul had described in 1:18–32. That appeal was based on and recapitulated the language in Romans 6, where Paul's explicit subject was baptism into Christ.⁶⁵ The whole of the letter, Furnish concluded, was structured by a form of exhortation that was common in the early churches, a form that Rudolf Bultmann characterized as the "formerly . . . but now" scheme, which emphasized the change brought about by baptism from a former life to a new life.⁶⁶

Most scholars concede that the letter explicitly addresses its recipients as from "the nations" (*ta ethnē*: 1:6, 13; see 15:14–16). A minority of scholars have insisted, rightly, that the letter's argument must be read as directed to the *explicitly named* audience rather than by importing a supposed Judean opposition into the letter, however congenial such a maneuver may seem to Christian apologetics.⁶⁷ The goal of rhetorical-critical interpretation of Romans should be to understand how the argumentation of the whole letter would have functioned to achieve the adherence of the explicitly named non-Judean audience. I have argued that case at length in an earlier work and will presume aspects of that argument here.⁶⁸

Scholars generally concede that the argumentation of Romans reaches an emotional climax in Romans 9–11, but often fail to follow through with the consequences of that observation. Nils Dahl demonstrated decades ago that the sorts of epistolary features that normally help us recognize the purpose of any other of Paul's letters are more evident in Romans 9–11 than in chapters 1–8. "Attention to such details," Dahl concluded, "shows that in Romans 9–11 Paul not only unfolds the theological theme of the letter as a whole, but also addresses the epistolary situation more directly than in most parts of Romans 1–8."⁶⁹ Instead, then, of reading the letter as a series of proofs of a thesis in 1:16–17, we should recognize the overall

structure of the letter as exhortation that reaches a climax in chapters 9–11 and is elaborated in chapters 12–15. It follows that chapters 1–8 should not be read as the doctrinal core of the letter, but as an argumentative preparation for the appeal in the later chapters that reaches its rhetorical climax in 9–11. Ben Witherington rightly describes the earlier chapters as constituting an extensive *insinuatio*, the “subtle or indirect approach” recommended by the ancient rhetoricians in situations in which the speaker’s case was expected to be controversial or unpopular. It is not until Romans 9, Witherington remarks, that “Paul has finally arrived at what has concerned him the most about the theological misunderstanding in Rome.”⁷⁰

More precisely, Witherington declares that Romans provides “a *refutatio* of Gentile misunderstandings about Jews and Jewish Christians.” I hold (with Witherington) that those “Gentile misunderstandings” constitute not just one aspect of the situation addressed by Romans, but the primary exigence of the letter. Although the majority of scholars continue to insist that at least one dominant purpose of the letter is to rebuke an inappropriate Jewish “boast,” represented either by Judeans among the Roman assemblies or by hostile Judean outsiders (in Rome, Jerusalem, or elsewhere), I observe that Paul never addresses himself to actual Judeans in the course of the letter (see chap. 3 on the function of the diatribe in 2:17–24). To the contrary, Paul explicitly directs the climactic warning in 11:13–34 to non-Judeans (*hymen de legō tois ethnesin*).

The “theological misunderstanding” to which Witherington refers has been described by other interpreters as “arrogance” (J. Paul Sampley), “nascent anti-Judaism among the Roman Gentile Christians” (William S. Campbell), or a “local anti-Jewish sentiment” tending toward “proto-Marcionism” (N. T. Wright).⁷¹ There is significant consensus that Romans addresses a specific situation, in the aftermath of Claudius’s expulsion of Judeans from Rome in 49 and Nero’s presumed rescript of that edict in 54, in which an ascendant majority of non-Judeans in the assemblies were in a position to look down on returning Judean exiles. Interpreting the evidence for this expulsion and its consequences will occupy part of chapter 3, where I also question to what extent this anti-Jewish animus is rooted in a distinctly *Christian* theological perception. I suggest that the letter confronts both the “boast” of supremacy over Israel and, by necessity, the attitudes in the wider cultural environment that nourished that boast.⁷²

Here I point out that this consensus, and the attitude that it attributes to Paul’s non-Judean hearers, militates against the common generalization that in Romans Paul seeks to legitimate the “Gentile church.”⁷³ The non-Judeans addressed in Romans 11 are decidedly *not* individuals anxious about their standing before God and hungering for Paul’s apostolic legitimation. We should resist the common presupposition that Romans involves a defense of the Gentile church against presumed Judean opposition; more, we should question why that presupposition remains so prevalent in the absence of any corroborative evidence in the letter.

Reading “voice under domination”

A rhetorical-critical approach to Romans that takes empire seriously requires first that we situate the rhetoric of Romans in a complex field of discourses in which the themes and tropes of imperial ideology were both abundant and powerful, and second, that we take account of the constraints imposed on discourse by disparities in power.

To the first point: we must investigate rhetorical themes (or *topoi*). *Topos*-investigation has a recognized place in rhetorical criticism, but it previously was applied to Romans only along conventional theological lines by comparing Paul’s view of the law to a supposedly antithetical view of the law in Judaism.⁷⁴ We are now in a position to take a much broader approach to *topos* investigation. Important studies have described the dominant themes in Roman imperial ideology and propaganda, as evidenced in contemporary poetry and panegyric speeches, official inscriptions, monuments, and the ubiquitous imagery of civic worship. These insights have been the focus of recent efforts to situate Paul in the context of empire, though not yet in the disciplined terms of a systematic *topos* criticism.⁷⁵

To the second point: given the disparities of power inherent in an imperial or colonial situation, political scientist James C. Scott insists that discourse in the public sphere can rarely be taken as a straightforward indication of what subordinates truly believe; it can be presumed only to represent the values of the dominant. Most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found “neither in overt collective defiance of power holders, nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites.”⁷⁶ Ordinarily, “the public performance of the subordinate will, out of prudence, fear, and the desire to curry favor, be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful.”⁷⁷ Similarly, the public transcript as often as not conceals the actual intentions of the powerful, which find complete expression only in a sequestered social space. However sophisticated the social science models at our disposal, Scott suggests, if we focus only on the official or formal relations between the powerful and weak, we have attended only to the public transcript and ignored the informal, “off-stage” or “hidden transcripts” of both groups.⁷⁸ We should consequently regard the surviving expressions of the dominant class with suspicion, because they provide only one, very partisan perspective on social reality.

Scott’s method is of more than academic concern in a day in which officials of the world’s most powerful government dissemble about their true motives and intentions⁷⁹ and regard the public disclosure of their hidden transcripts as acts of betrayal, or treason.⁸⁰ But the point is made routinely now regarding our sources from the early Roman Empire as well. For example, historian Martin Goodman observes that most of the surviving evidence regarding the character of the Roman Empire “was produced by those who cooperated with imperial rule,” and therefore

"modern understanding of the Roman world depends on appreciation not just of what was said but of what was left unstated from fear or from calculation." Usually "it did no good *to the rulers or to the ruled* for either of them to admit that the empire was controlled by terror."⁸¹ Similarly, Michael Parenti remarks that because the Roman order depended on "a coercive, fear-inspiring dominion" achieved through military conquest and enslavement, interpreters attempting a "people's history" of the early Republic must reconstruct the experience and perceptions of the underclass by reading "against the grain" of elite sources.⁸² These programmatic statements are consistent with Fredric Jameson's more general observation that class discourse is "essentially *dialogical* in its character," and that "the normal form of the dialogue is essentially an *antagonistic* one." It follows that "the illusion or appearance of isolation or autonomy which a printed text projects"—as when it is regarded, for example, as sacred scripture—must be "systematically undermined" in the course of interpretation.⁸³

It might be objected that it is illegitimate to apply the results of Scott's cross-cultural studies of contemporary peasant communities in colonial situations to a single text from the ancient Roman world. Surely the sorts of controls employed in a contemporary ethnographic study are not available when we pick up an ancient text from a context no longer available to us. Further, applying Scott's categories of hidden and public transcript to Romans would seem to require assigning Paul rather arbitrarily to one or another social location, a move that we might presume would say more about the interpreter's prejudices than about Paul himself or his assemblies.⁸⁴

Those objections are important; they are also readily answered. First, Scott's primary attention is on the public transcript: he is able to identify and discuss alternative, partially hidden transcripts when multiple contemporary texts may be compared, allowing him to distinguish different social sites and their respective transcripts. Rather than assign Paul *a priori* to the ranks of the empire's acolytes, or conjure a romantic picture of subversive Pauline assemblies meeting furtively by night, we are in a position to identify characteristics of public and hidden transcripts in Paul's day by comparing contemporary texts, and by attending to the clear descriptions in contemporary sources to the constraining effect of power on discourse (see chap. 1).

Second, although recent scholarship has produced wide recognition that some of Paul's phrases actually have political connotations, a clear example being the identification of an imperial slogan in the phrase "peace and security" (1 Thess 5:3), that recognition hardly justifies an indiscriminate hunt for political connotations throughout his letters. There are, nevertheless, criteria for establishing, to a greater or lesser degree of probability, what Richard B. Hays has called "intertextual echo" in Paul's letters; and though Hays's considerable efforts have been directed to identifying Paul's allusions to Israel's scripture, the same criteria are readily applicable to identifying echoes of Roman imperial themes.

My intention in each of the following chapters is to explore Paul's sustained interaction with imperial topoi throughout the rhetoric of Romans. I do not mean to suggest that although Paul *thought* he was speaking theologically in this letter, he was really, though unwittingly, speaking politically. We need not impose a crude dichotomy between theological or political interpretation, or arbitrarily assign primacy to one or the other. An ideological-critical approach to the argument of Romans allows us to recognize at once both the pressure of ideological forces in Paul's environment to limit or impose closure on the imagination of the possible, and the countervailing impulses to transcend that pressure that emerge from the collective imagination. To account for these impulses, Fredric Jameson speaks of a collective "political unconscious" into which aspirations toward freedom are again and again repressed by one or another form of domination. For his part, Paul speaks in this letter of the "groaning" that the Spirit generates, in "sighs too deep for words," among those who anticipate the "glorious liberation of the children of God," their "adoption" and the "redemption" of their bodies (8:18-27). An ideological-critical approach allows us to read Romans attuned to that groaning.



Augustus in military dress. Marble figure from the Prima Porta (Vatican Museums; photo © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, N.Y.).

CHAPTER ONE

IMPERIVM

Empire and the "Obedience of Faith"

The arrogance of powerful nations blinds them to the impossibility of achieving through force the willing consent of peoples whose labor and resources they would claim for their own. This impossibility generates tremendous tension within an empire's ideological system, a contradiction so threatening that it must be suppressed through ideological mechanisms that Fredric Jameson has termed "strategies of containment."¹ The ideology of the Roman Empire, no less than contemporary imperial ideology, was preoccupied with the challenge of "winning the hearts and minds" of conquered peoples.

Examining this constellation of rhetorical *topoi* offers a necessary lens for reading Romans. Paul declared that he was charged by God with securing "faithful obedience among the nations" (1:5, my trans.). That statement is a guide to the purpose of the letter and an indication of the political dimension of Paul's rhetoric. Because the obedience of nations was the prerogative claimed by the Roman emperor, we must situate Paul's rhetoric in a wider field of discourses, across different social locations, in which coercion and consent, obedience and subjection were aligned or opposed to each other.

The tension within Paul's letter between willing obedience and subjection has its roots in the ideological contradictions of the Roman imperial system. Romans shows that Paul's own thinking was constrained by the ideological pressures of his age. These pressures are not dissimilar to our own.

— The Battle for Hearts and Minds —

The consent of weaker peoples is of paramount importance to the ways in which the powerful seek to represent their rule to themselves and to their subjects. For that reason, the doctrinal system of an empire can ordinarily comprehend the refusal of the ruled to submit willingly to the benign intentions of their rulers as due only to some inherent fault that renders them unworthy, uncomprehending, and ungrateful. Thus, Edward Said observed, imperial cultures must rely on notions of bringing civilization to primitive or barbaric peoples and of the disturbingly